

THE LAW OF KARMA

By
G. W. Kaveeshwar



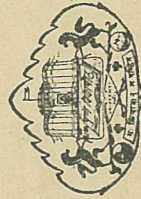
*Gurudeva R. D. Ranade Memorial Lectures
University of Poona, Poona-7.*

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Students and Scholars of Philosophy will find these lectures of great interest.

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PREFACE

I am grateful to the University of Poona, as well as the organisers of the Gurudeva R. D. Ranade Memorial Lecture Series, for the opportunity to deliver these lectures on the "Law of Karma" at Poona, specially in the Silver Jubilee Year of the University. It is a subject in which I am long and deeply interested.

I offer on this occasion my respectful homage to the illustrious memory of the late Professor R. D. Ranade, the great saint, mystic and philosopher of modern Maharashtra. Back in 1928, I had the privilege of being his student at the Allahabad University.

The Poona University authorities were further kind enough to extend the dates for my lectures, so as to await my return to India from America. While there, I had also the pleasure to discuss some of these ideas at the invitation of the Philosophy Department of the State University of New York at Buffalo, N. Y., U. S. A., in October 1973.

I shall feel gratified if the following pages are regarded as an humble contribution towards a better understanding of this important aspect of Indian culture and philosophy.

20-2-1975.

34, Janaki Nagar,
INDORE-1. (M. P.)

G. W. Kaveeshwar

The Law of Karma

Rationale and Implications

Three different Contexts concerning Karma

The Law of Karma is one of the basic principles of Indian ethical thought. Few philosophical propositions claim a wider acceptance in the field of Indian culture and religion than this Law. From teenagers to those of ripe old age, from the illiterate to scholars, politicians to philosophers, beggars to millionaires, almost everyone in this land will be found to swear by this Law; though not all who do so may be able to resist the temptation of pursuing an undesirable course of action for the sake of immediate gains. The Bauddha and Jain systems too advocate the Law of Karma. True, there is the Charvaka school of Indian philosophy that seems to ridicule the Law of Karma; but there are not many who would seriously advocate that view in theory.

It will be desirable, specially for the benefit of the non-Indian readers, to distinguish at the outset the Law of Karma from some other views with which it is likely to be confused. One of them is the doctrine of *niṣkāma* Karma-yoga. While the Law of Karma lays down that every one has to suffer sooner or later the appropriate consequences of his actions, the latter view^A advises a man to perform actions without any consideration for the consequences. The two doctrines are different from each other. If a man is to do his duty without any consideration for the consequences, there may not remain much point in insisting that he is responsible for them. Actually, the view that one should perform voluntary actions without any regard for its consequences seems to me unnatural as also unwise. And though it is often attributed to the Gīta, in reality the Gīta, as I have shown elsewhere,¹ does not advocate it. However, that is not the main subject under consideration here; and it should be enough to point out the distinction between the two doctrines without entering into a detailed discussion of the said Karma-yoga theory.

1. Vide my "Ethics of the Gīta".

There is also a ^{one note} third use of the word Karma in the theory of the Karma-mārga, i.e. the path of Karma or action, which advocates mainly such acts as religious sacrifices, charities for social good, etc. That, according to the Purva-mīmāṃsā school of Indian philosophy, secures salvation for the individual. In opposition to it, the Uttara-mīmāṃsā school (also known as the Vedānta school) maintains that true salvation of the soul can come only through (right) knowledge, not any action. The sage Jaimini is believed to be the main propounder of the former school, while Bādarāyana of the latter.

Enunciation of the Law

What precisely is the Law of Karma? In fact it is just an extension of the logical principle of universal and uniform causation to the sphere of moral values. In the physical world every event has its appropriate cause, and every cause its effect. An orange seed will inevitably produce only the orange fruit; and the latter will result only from the former. Similarly the good act must result in good consequences; and the bad in bad. Considered in these simple terms, the Law of Karma should be acceptable to all—in whatever part of the world. Do not the Christians too believe that the wages of sin are death, and that the virtuous are blessed and shall reap the due reward after death? All legal justice in any civilised society, whether in the national or international sphere, is based on the idea that the wrongdoer must in the end suffer, and the innocent be protected as also duly compensated. However, in the operation of legal justice compensation is possible only within limits; and at times not at all possible as in the case of rape or murder or a loss of vital limb. That brings us to the significant difference between the Law of the State and the Law of Karma.

While the Law of the State covers only a part of a person's conduct, the Law of Karma is concerned with the whole of it. The former does not normally interfere with that part of a citi-

zen's conduct wherein the society as a whole is not directly affected. It will certainly be an intolerable situation if the state were to judge every private act of a citizen. Further, legal justice usually metes out only a negative relief, by punishing the wrongdoer; it can hardly go on positively rewarding every good and virtuous act. The Law of Karma on the other hand assures appropriate consequences both for the good and the bad. Thirdly, in a law court the judgment is primarily based on the proof as placed before the judge; which may not always agree with the truth. The Law of Karma is strictly governed by the truth. No evidential perjury or forensic jugglery will work in the court of the Law of Karma. The Judge here knows not only the external aspects of a man's conduct, but also the complete inner working of his mind.

But by far the most significant contribution of the Indian Law of Karma is that while the hand of the State Law, though proverbially long, does not extend beyond the grave, the Law of Karma pursues the soul, if necessary, from one life to another. It is specially based on the theory of rebirth and transmigration of the soul. To quote a modern Indian scholar's enunciation of the Law, "Whatever action is done by an individual leaves behind it some sort of potency which has the power to ordain for him joy or sorrow in the future according as it is good or bad. When the fruits of the actions are such that they can not be enjoyed in the present life or in a human life, the individual has to take another birth as a man or any other being in order to suffer them"?

Indian thinkers have believed from ancient times that death is not the end of a personality. In the classical words of the Gīta, it is but a change of dress.

vasāmsi jīrṇāni yathā vihāya

navāni grhṇāti narō'parāni

tathā śarīrāni vihāya jīrṇāni

anyāni samyāti navāni dehī

II-22.

"Just as a man casts off wornout garments and dons other new ones, so does this self cast off worn-out bodies and take on other new ones (which event the ignorant call death of a person)". The Yoga-vashishtha offers another analogy.

*jāyante ca mriyante ca
śarīrāṇi śarīrīnām
pādapānām ca parīṇāni
kā tatra paridevanā*
VI-xxxii-50.

"Trees grow leaves and later drop them. So too living beings get bodies which are later given up; why therefore any grief for that?"

When passing from one body to another, the soul leaves all physical trappings behind, but carries along subtle traces of its lifelong actions that have not yet exhausted themselves through appropriate consequences. The state of the new birth is determined in part by these traces. Every newborn child arrives from some previous home it has left; and every one who dies proceeds to a new habitation.

*jātasya hi dhruvo mṛtyur-
dhruvam janma mṛtasya ca* Gīta, II-27.

"Whoever is born is sure to die, and whoever dies is certain to be (re-) born." Thus goes on the cycle of births and deaths (*janma-maraṇa-cakra*), which inexorably pursues one till he attains final liberation. To quote the Gīta again—

*māmupetya punarjanma
duḥkhālayamaśāśvatam
nāpnuvanti mahātmanah
samsiddhim paramām gatāḥ*
VIII-15.

"When the great souls achieving final liberation attain Me (the Supreme Divine Being), they are no more subject to the miserable impermanent state of rebirth."

The idea of the soul's birth and transmigration finds an expression in the writings of some Western thinkers also. For

example, here are the apt lines of Wordsworth in his "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality"—

Our birth is but a sleep and forgetting :
The soul that rises with us, our life's star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar :
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness.

Some thinkers in the West advocate the idea of the Immortality of the Soul to justify the practice of virtue in the life of a human individual; though it may not be exactly on the lines of the Indian conception of the cycle of births and deaths. Thus the well-known German philosopher Immanuel Kant maintained that the belief in the Immortality of the Soul is one of the basic postulates of ethics. His view is discussed in the sequel.

Original View and its Modification

It is often asked whether there is any proof for the belief in human rebirth. While one hears from time to time about interesting reports of some individuals, specially children, citing memories of their previous lives, I do not propose to adduce that here as evidence in support of the phenomenon of rebirth. Since memory is a function of the physical brain which is entirely left behind with the rest of the body when a man dies, it is also difficult to see how any one can consciously remember the events of his previous life. Even in the Gita, Lord Krishna while propounding the doctrine of rebirth, clearly states that while He, the Divine Being, can remember His previous births (incarnations), it was not possible for Arjuna, the human being, to do so.

*bahūni me vyatītāni
janmāni tava cārjuna
tānyaham veda sarvāṇi
na tvam vettha parantapa*
IV-5.

"Arjuna, both you as well as Myself have passed through several previous births. I know them all; but you do not."

Nevertheless, making allowance for any claims of supernormal consciousness on the part of some gifted or spiritually advanced individual, I am content to leave that question open for the purpose of the present argument. Apart from it, however, there is indirect evidence to support the belief in rebirth. How else shall we satisfactorily explain the inborn deformities, inherited diseases, exceptional excellences, and the myriad instances of tragic accidents and happy windfalls? It may be possible in some unhappy cases of this sort to offer a kind of physiological explanation concerning the bodily state of the parents and the foetus. But even accepting its correctness, it will not console or satisfy the poor sufferer when he further asks as to why of all persons he happened to be born of those parents. Unless such suffering is related to the person's Karma in the previous birth, there is all the risk of an unbearable mental frustration exploding into diverse forms of undesirable conduct, harmful not only for the society but the individual himself too. This is not to say that the theory of rebirth should be any excuse for denying those born with such deformities and the like the right to get rid of them, or for withholding sympathy in such attempts of theirs.³

I should like to add here that the Law of Karma as originally advocated in ancient India differed in one respect from its current expression as outlined above. The original idea included a belief in extra-terrestrial heaven and hell intervening between two lives on this earth. It was said that the soul of a good person proceeded after his death to enjoy heavenly pleasures appropriate to his Karma; and of an evil man to the tortures of hell. After enjoying those pleasures, or suffering those tortures, the soul returned to this earth for a fresh life. In the cases of exceptional evil the soul was also believed to be reborn at the sub-human level. In a celebrated passage the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad describes how the soul of a votary of truth passes after death through the domains of Light, Gods, Sun, etc., leading finally to the Brahma-loka from where it does not return; while the soul of one who performs such meritorious acts as the sacrifices, charity and the like, passes by the other path through the

3. These aspects of the Law of Karma are discussed below.

domains of the Moon etc., but ultimately returns to the earth; and those that follow neither of these paths are born as insects.⁴

With the development of philosophical thought, however, the importance of the heaven (*svarga*) and hell (*naraka*) was gradually underrated in comparison to the attainment of final liberation (*mokṣa*), which gives an absolute release from the cycle of births and deaths. It began to be stressed that howsoever long and happy the duration of the soul's stay in the heavenly abodes may be, it was bound to come to an end some time landing the soul again into the quagmire of the earthly life. As the Gita puts it in clear words—

*te puṇyamāsādyā surendralokam
ashnanti divyān divi devabhogān
te tam bhuktvā svargalokam viśālam
kṣīṇe puṇye martyalokam viśanti.* IX-20, 21.

“Attaining the meritorious abode of the god Indra, they enjoy there various sorts of heavenly pleasures. But, having enjoyed the vast pleasures of the heavenly life, they have to come back to (be reborn in) this mortal world, on their stock of merit being exhausted”. The old Upanishadic idea was that those who attain the Brahmaloка (abode of god Brahma) do not return to this earth; but according to the Gita such non-return is also only relatively true as against the comparatively early returns from the other heavenly places. Even a residence in the Brahma-loka must ultimately result in a return to the earth.

*ā brahmabhuvanāḷlokāḥ
punarāvartino'rijuna
māmupetya tu kaunteya
punarjanma na vidyate*

VII
IX-16.

“Arjuna, sooner or later one has to suffer a return back from all the worlds (abodes), including (even the highest of them viz.) the Brahma-loka; on attaining Me, however, there is no more any rebirth”. The Gita, therefore, while mentioning both the after-death paths of the good soul, one leading to Brahma-loka and the

4. VI-ii-15, 16. Several other Upanishads too express the view with slight variations. Thus see Chāndogya Upanishad, V-x-1 to 8; Prashna Upanishad, I-9, 10.

second to the other heavens, concludes in a very significant verse that the true *yogi* is enamoured of neither of them (VIII-27), but pursues instead the path of perfect Liberation.

As more centuries elapsed, Indian thought altogether gave up the belief in any heaven and hell beyond the earth, and advocated a direct rebirth on this earth in accordance with the Law of Karma, to enjoy or suffer the appropriate consequences of one's conduct. This view is now current in India; and it is in this light that modern Indian thinkers usually advocate the Law of Karma.

Punishment of the Criminal

Let us now proceed to consider critically ^{some} several important aspects and implications of the Law of Karma. I am afraid not many of those who like to believe in it are conscious of them. But a serious consideration of theirs is essential if we desire a rational theory of the Law of Karma in place of a dogmatic belief.

Does the Law imply that every suffering is necessarily the result of the victim's past bad action? True, every bad act of a person must ultimately result in his unhappiness. But is the converse true? If a person is robbed, raped or murdered, can the event be attributed to the victim's own past sin? If so, there would be hardly any justification for punishing the person who committed that heinous crime. In that case should not the criminal be said to have acted as but an agent or instrument of the Law of Karma, and so to deserve no punishment for himself?

But, I believe, few in any civilised society would agree to thus let the criminal go unpunished. Either, therefore, the Law of Karma has to be given up, or it has to be properly interpreted so as to justify the punishment of wrongdoers.

It appears to me that while in accordance with the Law of Karma one's evil act must result in his misery, the converse is not necessarily true. It is possible for a person to inflict suffering on another whose own past may have little to do with it. Even

if the victim's past be full of evil conduct, the suffering caused to him by some one else through a criminal act is not justifiable and so deserves punishment.

Let me elaborate. So far as a man's own evil deeds are concerned, the Law of Karma has various ways of its own to inflict suitable punishment, *but does not need for it the assistance of a criminal*. We witness every day Nature itself imposing suffering on human beings in diverse forms other than through human crimes. I am referring to the various tragic accidents and natural catastrophes in which no deliberate human will is involved. They are Nature's ways of punishing a man for his past bad Karma. The Law of Karma is precisely meant to account for them. How else shall we induce a person born with incurable blindness to bear his misery with patience and mental peace? Without some such explanation it will be hardly enough to tell him in Milton's words that "They also serve Him who only stand and wait". What better answer other than the Law of Karma can be given to him, if he returns with the question as to why he has particularly been condemned to serve the merciful God in that tormenting stand-and-wait fashion?

Equipped with such manifold ways of dealing with persons with a bad past, God or Nature or the Law of Karma does not need the additional help of an evil human will for doing justice in this world. God certainly fulfils Himself in diverse ways, but not through the evil will of a man. God does not appoint villains, rascals and criminals as his deputies to carry out His purpose. Let not any crime be therefore justified by referring to the victim's past, no matter how evil ^{the latter} it may be or supposed to be. In short, two wrongs do not make a right. Every crime, by whomsoever and on whomsoever committed, starts a fresh chain of punishable Karma.

I should make it clear that what is said above does not mean that every victim of a crime is necessarily a man with a bad past, deserving punishment at the hands of Nature, though not through the criminal. Since the crime is unconcerned with the victim's past, it can also be committed against one whose past is clean. What I have urged above is only that a crime can not be justified in the name of the Law of Karma, even if the victim himself has a vicious past.

Freedom of the Will

We have so far considered the victim's own past. An equally serious problem may arise when we consider the criminal's past. Does the Law of Karma imply that one's past Karma necessarily binds him to follow a particular course of action in the future? If a criminal's will in performing a crime is the inevitable result of his own past Karma, how far again would it be reasonable to judge him for his present act? If the Law of Karma means a denial of the freedom of will, all moral responsibility and accountability would cease. True, one may still ask how the evil originated in the chain of acts and consequences; but of many things in this world we know no absolute beginning, and have to be content with only the before and after. One could therefore maintain that howsoever the original sin may have arisen, at least as the matter stands at present the criminal's will is controlled by his past Karma (*buddhiḥ karmānusārīṇī*). This will be a view of strict determinism, which as said above would be fatal to moral accountability.

As Kant has rightly insisted, freedom of the will is essential for ethics. Every 'ought' implies a 'can'. A man, to be held morally liable for any act of his, must have the freedom to do it, not to do it, or to do it in any other manner, *kartum, akartum, anyathā kartum samarthah*. That description, applied to God in the cosmic field, must be true of man in the field of his individual conduct. If on the other hand, the criminal's past actions irrevocably decree that he shall commit a certain crime at a specified place and time, he cannot be held responsible for that specific act. It will be hardly any serious argument to urge that his past Karma had decreed not only that he will commit the theft, but also further that he shall thereafter go to jail. For, in this alleged decree of the Law of Karma there are involved at least three other parties unconcerned with the criminal's past—the victim of the offence, the police officer who successfully investigates that offence, and the judge that passes the sentence. Shall we say that the criminal's past determines the conduct not only of himself but also of all such other persons involved in the entire series of concerned events?

In fact the Law of Karma has to be so interpreted as to be consistent with the freedom of will. One's past Karma has no doubt an important influence on his present conduct and character. However, it remains but an influence, though at times a very strong one, and does not acquire the character of a compelling force. It does not completely block the individual's ultimate freedom of choice. The past evil Karma primarily shapes the person's present environment, which can be such as to facilitate the performance of a certain course of action. Nevertheless the environment can in the final resort only induce and tempt but not absolutely compel. Man at all such times remains the master of his own will. As the Yoga-vashishtha repeatedly says :

param pauruṣamāśrīya
dantairdantān vicīṇayan
śubhenāśubhamudyuktam
prāktanam pauruṣam jayet II-v-9.
prākṣvakarmetarākāram
daivam nāma na vidyate
bālāḥ prabalapumseva
tajjetumiha śakyate. II-vi-4.
yatnavadbhirdrḍhābhyaśāḥ
prajnotsāhasamanvitāḥ
meravo'pi nigīryante
kaiva prākpauruṣe kathā II-iv-18.

“With a right effort, so strong as to grind one's teeth by one's own, a man may conquer the result of his past Karma that is tending to produce further evil. There is nothing like fate other than one's own past Karma, and one can (if he so wills) conquer the same even as a strong man controls a child. By persistent effort and practice, a person equipped with intelligence and enthusiasm can devour even the Meru mountain; what then about the result of the past Karma?”

In the apt words of Dr. Radhakrishnan, “The *Bhagavadgītā* asks us to raise the self by the self. We can use the material with which we are endowed to promote our ideals. The cards in the game of life are given to us. We do not select them. They are traced to our past Karma, but we can call as we please, lead what suit we will, and as we play, we gain or lose. And there is free

dom"⁵. It is therefore always open for the evil person to repent and retrace his steps. But every further voluntary step in the direction of the tempting evil means a progressively increasing inward struggle and will-power required for turning back. If the sinner fails to put up such effort he will continue to fall deeper and deeper, and may finally have to relapse in a state of subhuman existence where no question of free will arises⁶. Having spent an appropriate period in that state the soul may again return to the human level.

That the human will is free in the real sense is a matter not of mere academic assumption but direct inward consciousness. A voluntary act usually follows deliberation; and one is conscious that at the end of the deliberation it is he who takes the decision one way or the other. He it is that is tempted, pulled or pushed in this direction or that; and finally chooses one of the alternatives. In arriving at the decision various factors may influence him; but in spite of all such pressures it is in principle always open for him to resist them all and decide otherwise. Men have on occasions done so in the past; and may do so in future. The choice is real, and the decision is not always in the line of least resistance. The essence of humanity lies in the freedom of will; and the Law of Karma does not deny it. Indeed it is just because man has the freedom of will, that the Law of Karma operates. The freedom of will is both a right and a duty; a privilege and an obligation.

If a man with a bad past is punished by having to face strong temptations which may easily lead to his further fall, but which by an intense exercise of his free will he may yet overcome, the contrary happens to a man with a good Karma. He may be rewarded by situations which facilitate the practice of virtue; and even if faced by temptations may find it comparatively easier to resist them. His character influenced by his past good conduct acts as a rampart to save him from a fall. And yet even that can not completely bind him, and in principle it is possible for such a good soul too to choose a bad path. No one, therefore, however saintly, can afford to completely rest on his oars; and here as elsewhere eternal vigi-

5. *The Hindu View of Life*, p. 54.

6. See e. g., *Katha Upanishad*, II-ii-6, 7.

lance is the price of progress and freedom. It is sometimes said that for an enlightened soul there remains no distinction between the good and bad, the right and wrong; and that whatever he does he remains unaffected. I am unable to agree with this view. It may be that such a person transcends the conventional distinctions; and may from his higher standpoint perform an act which at the level of the common mortal may not appear quite good. But even at his stage, and in his situation, there remains a basic distinction between what is essentially good and bad, and he has to pursue the former and avoid the latter. In other words he may go beyond the popular good and evil, but not beyond good and evil as such.

Undeserved Suffering and its Compensation

If the suffering deliberately inflicted by one human being on another is not the necessary consequence of the past Karma of either of them, how does the victim fare in the end? No doubt, according to the Law of Karma, he will be later compensated in this or the next life, and the other fellow will also pay for his sin. For every undue plus there shall be in due time a corresponding minus, and *vice versa*. But, it may be asked, why should one first be liable to an uncalled for suffering at the hand of some one else, and then be compensated for it? Is it really fair and just to the victim? But

This is indeed a pertinent question, and needs a satisfactory answer. I believe there will appear no injustice in it if a comprehensive view is taken. It is at bottom the result of the freedom of will granted to each one of us. The liability to suffer due to the free will of another is the price I have to pay for the privilege of having a free will myself. (It is as much possible for me to cause suffering to others as it is possible for them to cause it to me.) It would have been an injustice if some of us had possessed the freedom while the rest did not. We have already seen that without true freedom of will there can be no moral accountability. Even the highest good would not be the real good unless it is freely willed. And there can not be freedom of will without the attendant

the matter

risk of its being abused. All true freedom implies the freedom to abuse it. But whenever any one abuses his freedom of will, the Law of Karma comes into operation in the appropriate reverse direction.

Besides, if one can suffer due to the free will of others, so is the possibility of his benefitting by it. Just as there are villains who cause uncalled for suffering to others, there are also good souls who out of their free will run to the help and succour of those in need and distress.

This view that the evil acts of others can affect me also, which is later duly compensated, is however different from another view that the Karmas of all persons blend together to produce a joint effect on all, irrespective of what each may have individually contributed to that common stock. "In the long run" writes Mr. T. Christman Humphreys, "there is no such thing as personal Karma, for the acts of one are the acts of the whole, and the acts of the whole react on its littlest part. This vast and comprehensive blending of innumerable Karmas is the basis and the bedrock of the cosmic truth of Brotherhood. All things are in their essence good, and suffering is the servant of this Good. By that we learn, and in our common suffering move, by infinitely slow degrees, to that 'far off divine event to which the whole creation moves'".⁷ This may be the view perhaps of Buddhism, or more probably of Theosophy; but not of Hinduism as generally believed in India. According to the latter each one is separately responsible for his own good or bad acts, though it is certainly the duty of each to seek the good of all, to be *sarva-bhūta-hite-rataḥ*, as the Gītā aptly puts it. But so far as the spiritual development or the approach to divinity is concerned, each one has to tread his own path, and therein—

ātmaivahyātmano bandhur—

ātmaiva ripurātmanah

Gīta, VI-5.

"One is one's own friend, and one's own enemy too."

Let me here also express my difference with another view of the same author in this connection. The only undeserved suffering caused to any one in this world is due to the exercise of free will

7. "Karma and Rebirth," p. 28.

by other human beings; which is duly compensated later under the Law of Karma. As we have seen, this is inevitable if man is to possess free will in the real sense. However, Mr. T. C. Humphreys holds that apart from it, undeserved suffering may also be caused by one other factor. He writes, "The same clue may provide the solution to another problem, that of 'undeserved suffering'. Do we deserve all that happens to us, or are there occasional 'accidents' in which we suffer without justice? An immediate answer would be that if so, there must equally be undeserved happiness, for which in due course we must compensate with suffering, and that on balance the cosmic harmony, within and by the Law of Karma, would be restored. The key to the problem is time, one of the necessary illusions of manifestation. It would be impossible, at least to our conception, to guide an incoming 'soul' to a body and set of circumstances which exactly accord with its needs and desires, and all that did not do so, pleasant or unpleasant, would presumably be the subject of later adjustment by the all-embracing and utterly just Law". (*Ibid*, pp. 49-50).

Now, such a view makes God an incompetent creator, less than omnipotent, who on his own part is unable to exactly balance the good and evil in this world, and so needs later necessary corrections and adjustments to undo the injustice committed due to his own inefficiency or inability. I think this is only a little less blasphemous than believing in an evil-minded God as Thomas Hardy seems to do (specially in his tragic novel "Tess of the D'Urbervilles"). But as a matter of fact we observe so extremely subtle anatomical and physiological arrangements in the body of each living organism from the tiniest to the biggest, accompanied by minutely accurate functioning of the physical laws in this entire universe, that there is no justification to doubt the Divine Creator's capacity to place each new born babe in the precise situation its past Karma deserves. The Law of Karma is meant to correct the errors and foibles of men, not of God. And once a need of later adjustments in God's own creation is assumed, it may have no conceivable end; for there will be every likelihood that the subsequent adjustments too may not be quite exact and therefore require further corrections. I am afraid this will be but the thin end of a wedge introducing an endlessly chaotic state in the moral field.

The Problem of Mercy

In the discussion of the Law of Karma the practice of mercy presents a peculiarly intricate problem. Leave aside the suffering caused to a person by the evil acts of another. Such a sufferer clearly deserves all sympathy and kindness from the world at large. But what about that unhappiness which Nature inflicts on a man under the Law of Karma for his own past evil action? Is it proper for us to show mercy to such a person in distress? If his misery is the due consequence of his own past Karma, is it not proper that he should suffer it to the full and thus exhaust his evil Karma? And does not one who assists in alleviating his misery act in contravention of the Law of Karma? Does not Nietzsche bluntly express his view that those condemned by Nature to be born weak and wretched should die, indeed they should be helped to die? In short, have human sympathy, altruism, kindness and mercy any place in the scheme of the Law of Karma?

One thing may be accepted to start with. Since such a suffering is inflicted by the Law of Karma on a person for his own past, he has to be prepared to suffer the consequences and cannot *claim* any assistance from others to alleviate his misery. But it is also true that the quality of mercy has an important place in the moral sphere. Social life would lose all its charm, its soft tenderness, without the qualities of mercy and kindness. Totally bereft of such noble traits of character, human life would indeed become inhuman. True mercy indicates a projection of one's individual self into the wider community of selves, an expansion of the personal into the impersonal, of the finite into the infinite. It is the discovery and realisation of other selves within one's own.

There is no doubt that the quality of mercy has to be reconciled with the inexorable Law of Karma. And yet that should be attempted on a rational basis, and not sentimental grounds. Mercy is noble; but not in an unqualified manner. Howsoever good, it must not interfere with the basic process of justice. Misplaced mercy would be as dangerous as the complete absence of it.

Mercy but murders where it wrongly pardons a murderer. The Gita while praising charity rightly stresses that it should be shown *dese, kâle ca pâtre ca*, at the proper time, at the proper place and to the deserving person.

This is how the problem is treated by the writer quoted above. Referring to the question why mercy should be shown to a person suffering for his past under the Law of Karma, Mr. Humphreys calls it as "that heartless snobbery of thought which seeing suffering, remarks that it must be the sufferer's Karma to suffer, and anyhow, what is it to do with me? Such thought will bear its own result, a further hardening of the heart which, blinded with its dear delusion, continues to feel separate from its fellow-men, and, like the Levite, passes by on the other side" (*Ibid*, p. 30). Continuing further the writer adds, "Only the light of compassion, an understanding love for all that lives, can see that Karma as Law is a loving Law; that if it is just it is also utterly merciful. We who on earth make laws with which to judge our fellow men know that our justice is fallible, and, therefore, add to the cold machinery of justice the warmer quality of mercy which, so far from dropping like a gentle dew from heaven, is a virtue latent in the human heart. Only he who sees that law and justice and mercy and love are so many aspects of the Law of Harmony will understand that Karma is only a name we give that Law".

I do not think it would be a correct attitude to silence the question about the justification of mercy to a sufferer under the Law of Karma, by ridiculing the question as a mere "heartless snobbery of thought". Mercy even in that situation may be justifiable, but has to be duly justified. And as for the made laws, we have already seen that any interference with their due process in the name of mercy by some one other than the State itself is regarded as improper. Mercy to a criminal must not conflict with the due functioning of the legal machinery in the interest of social welfare.

While Mr. Humphreys thus tries to ^{dismiss} ~~silence~~ the question in the above remarks, a little later he also offers an answer which deserves notice here, as the same point is sometimes urged by

K..2.

others too. "One cannot 'interfere' with Karma, as many seem to suppose. A man may have placed himself in a serious predicament, and a friend is fearful lest, in helping him, he is 'interfering' in the working out of his Karma. The friend fails to realise that it may be the man's Karma that he should be helped, and the help or withholding of it is just as much his Karma as his present suffering" (*Ibid.*, p. 47). Now such a shallow defence of mercy is just a counterpart of the contention considered above, that a criminal's past Karma may ordain not only that he will commit an offence but also that he shall be caught by the police and punished by the judge. It is one thing to maintain that A's past Karma inevitably results in his present suffering in a natural accident; but quite another that his Karma will also decide that B shall show mercy to him. How can the Karma of one bind another to a particular course of action? Any such view will introduce complete confusion in the field of ethics. If the mercy shown by B is but the necessary result of A's Karma, what moral value would it have? Besides, if A's Karma can thus (produce) mercy by B, may the Karma on another occasion lead C to show cruelty, for which then he would not be responsible?

In this background I would like to deal with the problem in my own way. I believe it is possible to rationally reconcile mercy with the Law of Karma. A further clarification of the human system of justice may help here. It is true that any private interference while the punishment actually lasts is improper. But there is a subsequent stage when such private sympathy to the criminal may not be objected to and even may be welcomed by the State. Take the case of a man sentenced to an year's imprisonment for an offence. As a consequence he actually spends that time in jail. But that is not all. By the time he comes out of the prison he has lost his former job or other means of livelihood; and that aftermath of the punishment produces further misery for him and his family. However it is here open to any private philanthropic citizen or organization to sympathetically assist his subsequent rehabilitation, though he himself cannot claim it as a matter of right. Private mercy has full scope in this field; while any mercy personally to him prior to that can only be shown by the Government in accordance with its normal procedure.

I believe this analogy could be well applied to the punishments imposed by Nature under the Law of Karma. The point is that after the substantive punishment is over private mercy can be duly shown in the aftermath. Now if it is held that in the case of the divine punishment under the Law of Karma, its very first manifestation is the intended substantive portion, all the subsequent misery being its aftermath, there would be nothing wrong in showing mercy to a sufferer in the latter stage. Thus if one is hurt in an accident, the very causing of the injury is the substantive punishment for the past Karma, and whatever pain continues thereafter may be regarded as its aftereffect. Others may then rightly offer all sort of assistance for alleviating the victim's suffering, without violating the Law of Karma. The main punishment under the Law was only that he shall be hurt, and not further that he shall also continue to suffer the physical pain for a certain period of time. The moment some one's house is (accidentally) set on fire, the corpus of the punishment has occurred, and he deserves all help from the neighbours for bringing the fire under control. The substantive punishments inflicted by nature under the Law of Karma do not involve any necessary temporal duration, and so may admit of human mercy after they are manifested.

While the sufferer in such a case may not claim mercy and has to attribute his misery to his past Karma, all divine punishments thus permit whatever genuine kindness may be shown to him by others. For an analogy (another) look to the loving mother that slaps her child for a serious fault. When some one affectionately consoles the weeping baby on such an occasion, does the mother feel offended by it? Unless she has lost all sense of proportion in a momentary fit of anger, the mother would rather feel inwardly pleased by such affection shown to the child. Though she slapped the child to make it conscious of its fault, she has no desire that the child should continue to feel its pain for a long time. If there is no one else near to sympathise with the child, she may herself afterwards start fondling it. God too imposes at one stroke due punishment on an erring child of His; and yet (unless the Karma is so serious as to deserve instant loss of life itself) leaves it open for fellow human beings to show mercy to the sufferer.

I am conscious that under modern socialistic conceptions some part of the former province of mercy has been brought under social justice. Thus if a man is born poor, it may be said to be the result, not of his past Karma, but of an unequal and unjust distribution of wealth in the society; and any monetary help extended to him may, therefore, be classed as but an act of justice—even delayed justice as some may like to put it—instead of kindness or mercy. I have no intention to raise here the question whether any possible system of social organization would totally eliminate all economic inequalities. It should suffice my present purpose to say that even apart from that there are some other types of inequalities and forms of distress for which the society may not be held responsible except in a far-fetched sense. In those cases, it is only mercy, at the individual or social level, that can bring relief to the sufferer; and the Law of Karma, as shown above, does not come in its way.

Here is one more illustration—though illustrations have often only a partial application. A man liable to stomach-ache has been warned against over-indulgence of the palate. Nevertheless he is tempted into a repetition of such indulgence, and gets a severe attack. Now, will it be proper for the doctor to refuse medical aid on the ground that the suffering was the natural punishment for the patient's own conscious indiscretion? Clearly while the doctor may chide the patient for the indiscretion, it will be but proper for him to do all he can to alleviate the patient's suffering. The very start of the pain is the substantive punishment, and none has a right to say that it should necessarily continue for a certain length of time. Even so, mercy should be shown to one in distress, even though the suffering be attributed to his own past Karma.

No matter what mercy is shown by human beings, the divine purpose of punishment will be adequately served. The very necessity of receiving mercy from others—even if the giver is truly noble-minded—is in itself a humiliation and a punishment. Besides, in some cases not all the mercy that man can show may remove the whole, or even a major portion, of the suffering. Nevertheless human mercy has its own ennobling value, both for him who showers and him who receives it. It softens the

heart of the recipient; and makes his own attitude merciful towards other sufferers. It thus helps eliminate the evil in his soul, that was the root cause of his past vicious Karma.

The Will of God

It is almost customary to refer to the Will of God for consolation on occasions of great tragedy. It is no doubt possible to speak of the Divine Will as manifesting itself through the Law of Karma. I have myself used above some expressions indicating such a view point. However, there are some thinkers who seek to rely on the Will of God without asserting the Law of Karma. It is interesting to see how they try to explain the difficult facts of human life. That will throw lurid light on the importance and necessity of a belief in the Law of Karma.

A typical example of such a view is found in a thought-provoking book "The Will of God" by Mr. Leslie D. Weatherhead (The Epworth Press, London), which contains some sermons of his in the background of the horrors caused by the Second World War.

The author refers to the death and destruction caused in the air-bombing of England by Hitler's brutal forces; and protests with righteous indignation if any one calls it the Will of God. He shudders to think that God could ever will such horrors to innocent men; and adds that such deeds of wicked men in fact oppose and temporarily defeat the Will of God, though of course ultimately the latter prevails and rules. Therein Mr. Weatherhead is right. I have said above that God does not need the agency of criminals, whether individual or international, to realise His purpose. But how does the Will of God finally prevail in the long run? How are the wicked punished, and the righteous rewarded, specially when such consequences do not seem to visit the individuals concerned during their present life? It is just here that the Law of Karma comes into play.

But it is specially when he comes to that suffering which is not apparently and directly caused by a human being, that Mr.

Weatherhead's reliance on the Will of God lands him in a clearly untenable position. Could such suffering be attributed to the Divine Will? At first sight the Christian author of the sermons hesitates to say so; thinking that it would place God on the level of a human villain who out of his own will causes such a suffering to others. And yet having no alternative like the Law of Karma to fall back upon, he proceeds to draw a distinction between what he calls the 'intentional' and the 'circumstantial' will of God. His argument is that while God does not 'intentionally' will to cause suffering in such a case, e.g. a serious railway accident, nevertheless in the given set of circumstances created by the event, the injury or even death of a person involved therein may be said to be willed by God in accordance with the operation of the physical laws.

It will be better here to quote two illustrations taken by Mr. Weatherhead himself. Incidentally the first of them refers specifically to the Indian environment. "The matter came to me most poignantly when I was in India. I was standing on the veranda of an Indian home darkened by bereavement. My Indian friend had lost his little son, the light of his eyes, in a cholera epidemic. At the far end of the veranda his little daughter, the only remaining child, slept in a cot covered over with a mosquito net. We paced up and down, and I tried in my clumsy way to comfort and console him. But he said, 'Well, padre, it is the will of God. That's all there is to it. It is the will of God'. Fortunately I knew him well enough to be able to reply without being misunderstood, and I said something like this. 'Supposing some one crept up the steps on to the veranda to-night, while you all slept, and deliberately put a wad of cotton-wool, soaked in a cholera germ culture, over your little girl's mouth as she lay in that cot there on the veranda, what would you think about that?' 'My God', he said, 'what would I think about that? Nobody would do such a damnable thing. If he attempted it and I caught him, I would kill him with as little compunction as I would a snake, and throw him over the veranda. What do you mean by suggesting such a thing?' 'But, John,' I said quietly, 'isn't that just what you have accused God of doing when you said it was His will? Call your little boy's death the result of mass ignorance, call it mass folly, call it mass sin, if you like, call it bad drains or

communal carelessness, but don't call it the will of God'. Surely we cannot identify as the will of God something for which a man would be locked up in a jail, or put in a criminal lunatic asylum" (*ibid*, p. 8).

It is pathetic to see how in the absence of the Law of Karma, which could relate the untimely death to past Karma, the author of these sermons can only think of the tragic death (apart from such general social factors as mass ignorance, communal carelessness, etc.) as an intentional murder—whether by man or God! And since in this case it was certainly not by any man, and Mr. Weatherhead would be naturally shocked even to hear the accusation that it was an intentional murder by God, he falls back upon the explanation that *under the circumstances* created by the attack of the disease God may be said to have willed the death of the child. "Because of human folly, and sin, because man's free will creates circumstances of evil that cut across God's plans, because our oneness with the great human family means that the evil amongst other members of it may create circumstances which disturb God's intention for us, there is a will within the will of God, or what I call 'the circumstantial will of God'" (*ibid*, p. 17).

But the basic question in the above case would still remain,—who created the circumstances of the cholera attack on the child? Who indeed created the cholera germs, and why for? Now, about the purpose behind the creation of the bacteria, the said writer frankly admits that it is a mystery (*ibid*, p. 22). But it appears that he would still like to place the blame for the spread of the epidemic on such factors as general ignorance, unhygienic conditions, mass poverty, for which the human society as a whole may in some sense be held responsible. While there may be some point in this charge, it is doubtful if all the care, vigilance and good government in a society can totally eliminate such untimely deaths. Besides, under the same deplorable social conditions not all persons so die; which raises the problem under consideration. But leaving that matter aside, let us proceed to Mr. Weatherhead's second illustration, where at least no such blame can apparently be placed on the society for the tragedy.

"So, to go back to our early illustrations of death which we too loosely called 'the will of God', we can only admit them as

God's circumstantial will. Somebody once asked me, when a baby had fallen out of a fifth-story window, whether its death was the will of God. The question shows how important it is that we should get our thinking straight, for the answer is both 'yes' and 'no'. Yes, it is God's circumstantial will. I mean there that it is God's will that the law of gravity should operate. It is God's will that a baby is made of flesh and blood, and if a baby hits a concrete pavement after falling from such a height, of course it is God's will that the little body should be broken, otherwise God would have made babies' bodies of something like india-rubber. Yet we feel that we must answer the question by an emphatic 'no' and say that the death of the baby was not the will of God, for it was not the will of God that it should be allowed to fall out of the window at all". (*Ibid*, pp. 21-22).

The above quotation clearly illustrates the confusion regarding the will of God in such accidents. Having no other reasonable explanation like the Law of Karma, the said writer can not deny the will of God behind the death of the baby, and yet his mind revolts from openly admitting it. The reference to what he calls 'the circumstantial will of God' will hardly bear any critical scrutiny. The law of gravity notwithstanding, not all children standing in a window fall down. Why did this one happen to be placed in such a position that the law of gravity could act in so cruel fashion? Further, even after that law of gravity had come into operation, why did not God (if His intentional will was that the baby should live and not die) so arrange that just at the critical moment some one passing below would have caught the falling body of flesh and blood in his arms? Some such miraculous escapes do happen occasionally. Why did it not take place in this case? If the baby's weeping mother puts such a question, one wonders what consolation Mr. Weatherhead would have to offer?

I wish instead of quibbling about the so-called 'circumstantial will' of God, the author of those sermons had rather thought of the 'judicial' will of God, which dispenses appropriate consequences of every one's Karma, good or bad. Apart from it, He has no positive intention either to confer material happiness or cause unhappiness to any one. Having granted freedom of will to human beings, He is content to let each one pursue his own

course of action, and suffer the due results thereof. Lord Krishna at the end of his long discourse in the Gita tells Arjuna—

*iti te jñānamakhyātam
guhyāt guhyataram mayā
vimṛśyattad aśeṣeṇa
yathecchasi tathā kuru* XVIII-63.

“ Thus have I disclosed to you this most secret knowledge. Reflect fully over it and do as you wish ”. True, the Gita also says—

*īśvaraḥ sarvabhūtānam
hrddesē' rjuna tiṣṭhati
bhrāmayan sarvabhūtāni
yantrārūḍhāni māyayā* XVIII-61.

“ God resides in the hearts of all beings; and moves them all by his power even as birds on a rotating machine ”. However, that should be taken to mean only that the Divine Self within constantly watches every subtle movement of the mind and the body; placing each person in an appropriate situation warranted by his Karma. No one can escape the consequential environment as the result of his conduct. But in that background he is yet free to make his own choice for his present course of action; and thereby earn his own future happiness or unhappiness.

9

Virtue and Happiness

At this stage I would like to clarify the concepts 'good' and 'bad' used above. In the statement that in accordance with the Law of Karma 'the good must eventually result in good' (and the bad in bad), the term 'good' occurs twice, once as the subject and again as the predicate. In the former place it means the morally good or virtuous act; an act performed with good will and all due consideration of the possible consequences. I do not think it necessary here to enter into a detailed discussion of the nature and contents of virtue or the good will. Even the layman has a general understanding of the matter; and that should suffice for our present purpose.

But what does the 'good' in the predicate mean? Of course it means good consequences. But they may be of two kinds; either subjective i.e. on the person himself, or objective i.e. on the world at large. Now, the Law of Karma does not guarantee, and is not primarily concerned with, the objective consequences of one's act. They depend not simply on the good will of the agent, but on several other factors beyond his control. The Gita itself includes among such factors what it calls the *daivam* i.e. Luck or Fate. The Law of Karma does not assure that every virtuous act will necessarily produce good consequence on the world outside in the immediate future. An act may remain virtuous even if, for no fault or negligence of the doer, consequences of an unfortunate kind happen to be produced.

The Law of Karma is chiefly intended to deal with the consequences on the person himself. The good act must produce good results for him; and *vice versa*. But even here the consequences may mean his moral and spiritual uplift, or his material happiness. Of these the first are hardly in dispute. It does not need the Law of Karma to assure that every practice of virtue further develops and strengthens the virtuous character inside. As the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad puts it in simple words *pūṇyo vai puṇyena karmaṇā bhavati pāpāḥ pāpena* (III-ii-13), "By the performance of good action one becomes good, and evil by the performance of evil action". It would be nothing short of a self-contradiction to suggest that the practice of virtue can ever result in a moral fall, or that of vice in a moral uplift.

The principal popular interest in the Law of Karma however centres round those personal consequences which are of the nature of mundane happiness. And it is here that the Law gives the much sought for assurance of a necessary connection in the long run between a good act and personal happiness (and *vice versa*). Whatever be the immediate experience, ultimately virtue shall not be divorced from happiness; or at any rate shall not go with unhappiness. Nor shall vice be permitted to escape from unhappiness, and run away for long with happiness.

Of course it is always open for a virtuous character to voluntarily renounce material happiness for himself and pursue the

practice of virtue for its own sake. Indeed that is the highest state of virtue, and of disinterested altruism. An ancient Sanskrit prayer says—

*na tvāham kāmāye rājyam
na svargam nāpunarbhavam
kāmāye duḥkhataptānām
prāṇinām ārtināśanam*

"I do not long for a kingdom, or the heaven, or even freedom from rebirth; all that I wish is the removal of the misery of those beings who are in distress". But such renouncement of one's personal happiness must be entirely voluntary, and should dawn within. It may not be forced on any one. Apart from that, therefore, the Law of Karma assures that the performance of duty and practice of virtue shall eventually be rewarded with appropriate personal happiness. In this the Law of Karma only voices a fundamental expectation of the ordinary human mind, which is scandalised whenever it sees in this perplexing world virtue followed by unhappiness while vice rewarded with happiness, and so seeks shelter, hope and consolation in the Law of Karma.

The necessary link between virtue and personal happiness has been recognised not only by the Hedonistic and Utilitarian thinkers like Bentham, Mill and Spencer, but also by Immanuel Kant, the wellknown advocate of the moral law as a Categorical Imperative. In a significant passage in his *Critique of Practical Reason* (Book II, Chapter 2), Kant explains how in the *Sumum Bonum* or the highest end of man virtue and happiness must both exist. "The conception *highest* contains two distinct ideas, which must be carefully distinguished, if we are to avoid needless perplexities. The *highest* may mean either the *supreme* (*supremum*) or the *complete* (*consummation*). The *supreme* is a condition which is itself unconditioned or is not subordinate to anything else (*originarium*). The *complete* again, is a whole which is not part of a larger whole of the same kind (*perfectissimum*). Now virtue, or the worthiness to be happy, as we have seen in the Analytic, is the *supreme* condition of all that we can regard as desirable, and therefore, the supreme condition of all our search for happiness. Virtue is therefore the supreme good. But it is not the whole or complete good which finite rational beings desire to obtain. The complete good includes happiness, and that not

merely in the partial eyes of the person who makes it his end, but even in the judgment of unbiased reason, which regards the production of happiness in the world as an end in itself. If we suppose, for the sake of illustration, that there exists a rational Being who has all power, it cannot be in accordance with the whole will of such a being, that his creatures should be unable to secure the happiness which their nature demands and of which their obedience to the moral law makes them worthy. The highest good of a possible world must therefore consist in the union of virtue and happiness in the same person, that is, in happiness exactly proportioned to morality. By the highest good is here meant, therefore, the whole or complete good. In this complete good virtue is always, as a condition, the supreme good, having no condition higher than itself; while happiness is no doubt always agreeable to the person who possesses it, but is not good simply in itself, and in all respects: it is good only under the condition that a man's conduct is in conformity with the moral law."⁸

It will be seen that in this important passage Kant has brought out three salient points. (1) Virtue by itself is a 'supreme' end; that is, it has intrinsic moral value and ought not to be regarded as but a means to happiness or for the matter of that to anything else. (2) Nevertheless, virtue is not in itself the 'complete' end, unless supplemented by happiness. (3) Thirdly, happiness when unaccompanied by virtue has no moral value of its own; indeed as resulting from vice it has negative value and is an evil. Kant indicates the necessary accompaniment between virtue and happiness, without making the practice of virtue a means to happiness, and at the same time without conferring any independent moral status on happiness *per se*. Further, by maintaining that virtue, without happiness, has a value of its own though incomplete, he has excellently indicated that one

8. *Selections from Kant*, by Watson, pp. 291-92. The portion "The complete good includes happiness . . . as an end itself" is translated by Caird thus. " . . . to be the totality of Good, it (i. e. virtue) would require to have happiness added to it. Further, it would require this addition, not merely in the partial eyes of an individual who makes himself his own end, but even in the judgment of an impartial reason, which must regard all persons as ends in themselves". (*The Critical Philosophy of Immanuel Kant*, Vol. II, p. 291.)

should continue the practice of virtue for its own sake, even if for the time being it may not bring happiness.

Here is the view of another European thinker on the point. Bishop Butler, regarded as the advocate of Eudaemonistic Intuitionism in ethics, has this to say regarding the relation of virtue and happiness which the Law of Karma wants to stress. "Though virtue or moral rectitude does indeed consist in affection to and pursuit of what is right and good as such; yet, when we sit down in a cool hour, we can neither justify to ourselves this or any other pursuit, till we are convinced that it will be for our happiness, or at least not contrary to it." ("Sermon XI"). Add to this its necessary counterpart that vice will not ordinarily be shunned unless one is convinced that it will necessarily lead to unhappiness, and we have in substance the Law of Karma.

The practice of virtue, Kant tells us, is good in itself, though as the highest good it remains incomplete without the supplement of happiness. Now, who is to assure this supplement? It is clear that in practising virtue the person has done all that was possible for him to do. The actual appearance of happiness depends also upon the circumstances outside. "But a rational agent in the world is not the cause of the world and of nature itself. There is no reason whatever, in the case of a being who is a part of the world and is dependant upon it, why the moral law should imply a necessary connection between happiness and morality proportionate to happiness". (Watson, *ibid*, p. 296). But the final goal is the highest good which includes happiness. Kant therefore explicitly concludes that we must believe in God and rely upon Him to relate virtue with happiness. We, says he, "must, therefore *postulate* the existence of a cause of nature as a whole, which is distinct from nature, and which is able to connect happiness and morality in exact harmony with each other. . . . There is therefore implied, in the idea of the highest good, a being who is the supreme cause of nature, and who is the cause or author of nature through his intelligence and will, that is, God". (*Ibid*, p. 297). Is not Kant expressing in all this the Law of Karma itself in his own way? Indian thinkers call God as the *karmādhyaṅśa*, i.e. the Lord who presides over the enforcement of the Law of Karma, and sees that happiness goes with virtue in exact proportion while unhappiness with vice.

But there is one more important common ground between Kant and Indian thought in this respect. Kant easily sees that the supreme good is not capable of being achieved in a single human life; and that man has to gradually progress towards its attainment. This directly leads Kant to the continuation of the soul beyond the present life. "Now, this infinite progress is possible only if we presuppose that the existence of a rational being is prolonged to infinity, and that he retains his personality for all time. This is what we mean by the immortality of the soul. The highest good is therefore practically possible, only if we presuppose the immortality of the soul. Thus immortality is inseparably bound up with the moral law". (*Ibid*, p. 295). The great similarity between Kant's view and that behind the Law of Karma is obvious. The Gita declares at one place—

*bahūnām janmanāmante
jñānavān mām prapadyate* VII-19.

"At the end of several births the man of knowledge attains Me". So also at the conclusion of the sixth canto in the Gita, Arjuna puts the following question. What happens to one who sincerely seeks to pursue the ideal but fails to attain it in one life? Is he lost 'like a piece of cloud reduced to shreds between the earth and the sky?' The Gita's plain assurance is that none who practises virtue will meet an evil end; that such a soul is eventually reborn in a good family, where his nature and previous Karma goad him on to continue his former incomplete efforts. This goes on from life to life till he achieves the goal.

*prayatnāt yatamānastu
yogī samśuddhahakīlbiṣaḥ
anekajannamasiddhah
tato yāti parām gatim* VI-45.

"The *yogī* pursuing his efforts with persistence, freed from evil, progressing in the course of several lives, finally attains the highest state".

Kant's direction that though virtue should in the end be accompanied by happiness it should not be treated as a means to it, has its parallel in the Gita's expression *mā karmaphalā-*
heturbhūh (2/47), "Let not the personal fruit of thy action be

thy motive for the performance of duty". The Gita also lays down that vice, inspite of temporary successes, shall eventually meet with unhappiness (canto XV); and that a man of virtue, notwithstanding temporary frustrations, shall not in the end remain in unhappiness (6/40). It has however to be noted that while the Gita assures material happiness for the virtuous, its supreme ideal (the highest *yoga* state) is one wherein the person voluntarily renounces such happiness (vide 2/50, 51; 8/28; 18/12) and absorbs himself in the uplift of all beings with an equanimous attitude of calm contemplation. It is the state of bliss (*atyantam sukham*), wherein not only all mundane unhappiness is absent (6/23), but the person also passes beyond the stage of material happiness. However till that state is attained by self-effort, the Gita following the Law of Karma assures material happiness for the virtuous.

Faith in Divine Grace

Apart from the Will of God, one often hears about the Divine grace coming to the help and succour of devotees in distress. Followers of several religions in the world seek heartfelt consolation in the idea, naming God in their own respective ways. In India this faith is specially emphasized by the Bhakti cult, advocated by Ramanuja and Vallabha, with numerous respected saints amongst its followers. Indian mythology contains a number of touching anecdotes narrating how the merciful God rushed miraculously to rescue earnest devotees, including even some (erstwhile) sinners, in very dangerous situations.

How does this Divine grace affect the working of the Law of Karma? Can repentance, devotion, prayer and surrender to God save one from the normal consequences of his evil deeds? Does the grace of God cancel or abrogate the Law of Karma in some cases at His will? If yes, will it not undermine the common man's faith in the Law, and also result in a temptation to show repentance and offer surrender? How far will that attitude then remain a sincere one? But, on the other hand, if

prayer and repentance before God is not to secure any relief to the person concerned, what will be the value of such an attitude of self-surrender ?

The dilemma is a subtle one, and needs delicate handling.⁹ In discussing it I should like to restrict myself to the Law of Karma as such, and avoid touching in any manner any body's faith apart from that. It will be better to first clarify certain notions involved in this matter. The idea of Divine grace presupposes faith in personal (*saguna*) God, capable of accepting the devotee's surrender and as a result conferring some special good on him. Those who do not believe in a personal God-head can hardly talk of such Divine grace, over and above the laws of the universe in the physical and metaphysical sphere. In the words of Aurobindo, "The way of devotion is impossible if the personality of the Divine cannot be taken as a reality, a real reality and not a hypostatis of the illusion".¹⁰

Secondly, what precisely are we to understand by 'Grace' ? Distinguishing it from Justice, it is often urged that while the latter is based on merit and can be claimed, grace is a favour shown at the sweet will of the donor without any consideration of the recipient's merit. To me this dichotomy seems misleading; and a correct appreciation of this point should be of considerable help in dealing with the problem in hand. It is true that while justice can be claimed as a right, grace differs from it. Yet at the same time, grace is also to be distinguished from mere 'favour'. The latter may at times be shown without regard to the recipient's merit or worthiness, and conferred even for some egoistic consideration of the donor himself. Grace, on the contrary, is the conferring of some special benefit which the recipient is unable to secure on his own strength, and also may not demand or claim, and yet deserves it if and when granted

9. In an article "Divine Grace and the Law of Karma" ('*Prabuddha Bharata*' , March 1961), Dr. Shashi Bhusan Das Gupta raises this problem; but while dealing with it, intermingles the judicial Law of Karma with the Karma-mārga or the path of Action (as a means to attain Liberation), as also with Karma in the sense of God's cosmic creative activity in unfolding the world-process.

10. " *The Synthesis of Yoga* ", p. 552.

by the giver on his own accord, purely for the good of the recipient without any private consideration on the part of the giver. Grace is not an unmerited grant to one not worthy of it. Divine grace, in its true sense, comes only to one who has completely humbled and surrendered himself before God, is prepared to lay down all his individual will at the feet of the Master, and thus has become worthy to receive the grace. Such grace clearly differs from a 'boon', which may sometimes be obtained even by an inwardly unworthy person, as in the story of Shiva and Bhasmāsura.

Thinking that grace is unconcerned with the worthiness of the recipient, it is also sometimes considered to be an arbitrary favour interfering with the normal course of law. But can Divine grace be ever termed 'arbitrary' ? An act is arbitrary when it is done without proper grounds, out of a passing irrational whim, from a standpoint smacking of partiality, motivated by unfair egoistic considerations, or runs counter to the basic canons of justice and morality. It is then that the favours shown by human beings, specially those in authority, are sometimes called arbitrary. But can any of these descriptions apply to the manifestation of grace by God to a self-surrendering devotee ? Is not God, even in the personal form, above all the narrow egoistic considerations ? As said in the Gītā, there is nothing in the universe that He does not possess and would wish to have (*nānavāptamavāptavyam*, 3/22); and He is equal in His attitude towards all beings, with special like or dislike for none (9/29). Divine grace therefore, if truly Divine, is never egoistically motivated, nor the outcome of any passing whim; nor is it, as said above, without due, and indeed very strict, consideration of the devotee's merit.

Again, nothing that God does can be against justice or morality. For the very notion of God is that He is the final basis and goal of all justice and morality. If the purpose of morality is the uplift of human life, and the ultimate aim of all human activity is to attain God, nothing coming from Him can be against morality. One is usually tempted to compare Divine acts with those of individual human beings in power. A better

analogy would be the action of the society or nation as a whole. The act of a King, President or Prime Minister, though ostensibly in the name of the nation, may at times be in reality anti-national; but can anything willed by the entire nation be called 'anti-national'? However, on rare occasions in history, even an entire nation may act in a wrong (and so in the long run anti-national) fashion, if it goes against the rightful interests of the world community. The still better analogy to a Divine act may therefore be the decision by the entire human community of nations (unanimously, and not by majority only, for the latter too may perhaps sometimes go wrong). Further than this, no exact parallel to a Divine act can of course be found on the human level. Divine grace, therefore, if properly understood, can not be called arbitrary.

Let us now come to our problem about the possible conflict between Divine grace and the Law of Karma. I feel that on proper consideration the apparent conflict may vanish. Divine grace follows total self-surrender to God. But any prayer to save oneself from the due operation of the Law of Karma, which is God's own law, will mean that there is not as yet the total surrender to God's will. The point is that one completely surrendering and resigning himself to God will not in fact pray for his relief from the Law of Karma. In the words of the Gita (9/30), with such surrender even an erstwhile great sinner (*sudurācārah*) would become a veritable saint (*sādhuh eva*); and all that he will now pray for is, like Christ, "Thy Will be done", or like the Marathi saint Tukaram, "to remain with a contented heart in whatever state He (Ananta) may place one".

But while the devotee may not pray (let alone claim) such a relief, may not the Lord Himself in his grace confer it on him, abrogating the Law of Karma in his case? Even here I am inclined to a negative answer; unless in a very exceptional case such relief to that person seems to God absolutely inevitable for wider social good itself. Otherwise any such relief may cause a wrong impression in the common man and disrupt the working of the Law of Karma, which God would not desire.

How then may Divine grace benefit the recipient, consistently with the Law of Karma? Let me venture an answer.

In such a case, though the corpus of the punishment may not be affected, the total self-surrender to God followed by Divine grace will illumine the person's mind and change his entire perspective towards the situation. The suffering will now appear, not as externally imposed, but as voluntarily suffered in compliance with Divine will. Though for all outward purposes he may continue in the same environment till its normal duration, inwardly he will be quite a changed soul, free in heart, resigned and contented. For such a one—

Stone walls do not a prison make,

Nor iron bars a cage.

An inner illumination like this will remove all the sting of the suffering, without violating the Law of Karma.

So much about the sinner. But there are also others who can be considered in this context. There may be the honest and innocent but weak ones, defending themselves with their frail frames, against the deliberate evil of mighty wicked persons, and praying God for help. I would not say anything against such pious faith in the kindness of God. It does not violate the Law of Karma. The wellknown case of the hapless Draupadi, wife of the Pandavas, facing the unrighteous Kauravas in the open assembly (as described so pathetically in the Mahabharata) would fall under this category.

So too may one pray for the grace of God in what I have called the after-effects of the consequences under the Law of Karma. Where human mercy has a due scope, Divine mercy surely has.

But finally, and in the last resort, the basic nature of Divine grace is one's spiritual uplift and enlightenment rather than mundane happiness and worldly well-being.

teṣāṃ satatayuktānāṃ

bhajatām prītipūrvakam

dadāmi buddhiyogam tam

yena māmupayānti te

teṣāmevānukampārtham

ahamajñāna-jam tamah

nāśayāmyātmabhāvaśtho

jñānadīpena bhāsvatā

Gītā, 10/10

11.

“Those, ever absorbed in loving devotion (of Mine, i. e. God), I bless with *buddhiyoga* (the *yoga* state of equanimous reason) with which they reach Me -10. Out of mercy for them, I residing in their hearts remove the darkness of their ignorance with the shining light of Knowledge.” The real character of Divine grace is to secure for the true devotee final Liberation from the cycle of worldly births and deaths (Gita, 12/6, 7); to take him nearer to God (18/55); to convert his finite human personality into ‘ Life Divine’, as Aurobindo would put it; to merge completely the tiny individual stream of his consciousness into the vast unbounded ocean, and not merely to increase its flow of impermanent drops of water or add to the ephemeral scenic beauty and mundane wealth of its banks.

Viewed in this light, Divine grace need not be considered in any conflict with the Law of Karma.

11

Law of Karma and ‘Cāturvarṇya’.

Before concluding I wish to discuss the Law of Karma in the context of the theory of *cāturvarṇya* or the fourfold classification of society into the Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. For centuries such classification has been a hallmark of Indian culture and religion; and in practice has been considerably abused. Does the Law of Karma sanction the lifelong suppression of an individual or group to a humiliating social status in spite of his possessing better physical and mental capacities?

My view is in the negative; and I believe it was very unfortunate that some elements in the Indian society happened to believe that the Law of Karma authorises such discrimination. The error was basically an honest one; for those who specially held that view claimed no special material gains for themselves. Thus the Brahmins, who were placed at the top of such social ladder, had for themselves such ideals as non-possession and devotion to learning. And yet for the serious error India had to pay very heavily, as will be seen from her miserable failure to

stand united against repeated foreign invasions for centuries together. In this catastrophe the Brahmins themselves probably paid the highest in blood as also through the inhuman destruction of their families.

In fact no human being has the authority to cause suffering to any one else on the ground of the latter's past life. God alone has that discretion and power. If any thing, man has to show sympathy and kindness to those suffering under the Law of Karma for the evil done in the past life. Man can only judge the events in the current life; and that too by a collective representative judgment expressed through a duly constituted court of law, and not any individual judgment.

The Gita, and the Mahabharata of which it forms a part, indicate quite a liberal view regarding the *cāturvarṇya*, in happy contrast with some other works. Drona, though born a Brahmin, is depicted not only as playing the role of an active warrior like any Kshatriya, but even as the highest commander of the Kaurava army in the great war. None in the army protested. Karna, publicly known as the son of a *sūta* (not quite a Kshatriya), was also raised to the same post. In both cases personal qualities was the criterion. On the other hand, Bhishma, though a Kshatriya, gave sublime philosophical discourses, which even the great Brahmin sages respectfully listened to. Krishna too, without being a Brahmin by birth, is shown as having expounded the classical Gita discourse, which to this day even the Brahmins regard a privilege to reverentially study, discuss and interpret. So also Krishna personally acted in the war as a charioteer, normally not the role of a Kshatriya. The Mahabharata also carries a story about God Indra once appearing under the instructions of Krishna himself before a thirsty Brahmin. Indra appeared as a *cāṇḍāla*, a very low Shudra, and therefore, the Brahmin refused to accept water from him, whereupon Krishna remonstrated the Brahmin (Āshvamedhika Parva, chapter 53).

It does not appear that the Gita insists on a necessary connection between the previous life and the present birth under the *cāturvarṇya* scheme. Thus at the end of the VI canto, while assuring that a virtuous man unable to realise the ideal in one

life is reborn happily so as to continue his past efforts, there is no insistence that the rebirth is in a Brahmin or Kshatriya family. All that the Gita says is—

śuciṇām śrīmatām gehe
yogabhrāṣṭo'bhijāyate
athavā yogināmeva
kule bhavati dhīmatām

6/41

42

“Such a one failing to attain the highest *yoga* state is reborn in the house of virtuous prosperous persons, or in the family of learned *yogis*”. Now who can aspire to be such a *yogi*? The VI canto of the Gita concludes with a direction to Arjuna to become a *yogi*, who is ranked higher than a man of mere knowledge, action or austerities. (6/46). This canto of the Gita has very much in common with canto 240 of the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata, with reference to the account of the *yoga* and *yogi*. And with all that similarity the Shanti Parva chapter concludes on the following significant note—

api varṇāvakṛṣṭastu
nārī vā dharmakāṅkṣiṇī
tavapyetena mārgeṇa
gacchetām paramām gatim

“Even one belonging to the low *varṇa*, or a religious-minded female, can attain by following this path the highest state”. It is clear that the author of Mahabharata attaches here no special spiritual significance to birth in a particular social class under the *cāturvarṇya* scheme. The above verse has an apt echo in the following verse of the Gita—

mām hi pārtha vyapāśritiṃ
ye'pi syuh pāpayonayah
striyo vaiśyāḥ tathā śūdrāḥ
te'pi yānti parām gatim

9/32

“Arjuna, by resorting to Me (God), even those born with miserable bodies due to their past evil deeds, as also even the females, Vaishyas and Shudras attain the highest state”. The *pāpayonayah* are here mentioned separately from the three categories of females, Vaishyas and Shudras. The *pāpa-yoni* men are those

who due to evil in their previous lives, may be born with various physical deformities and the like, whether they be Brahmins or Shudras. And yet because in those times the females, Vaishyas and Shudras were underrated in certain social quarters, the Gita assures that even they can attain the highest state by a devotion to God—and that directly, not necessarily through an intervening birth as a male Brahmin or Kshatriya.

That the *pāpa-yoni* persons can belong to any of the four classes is also clear from verses 19 and 20 of the XVI canto in the Gita. It says that such persons are condemned to a birth in the *āsuri yoni*; which does not necessarily mean the females, Vaishyas and Shudras. It may mean a birth in any other class also, where there may be temptations for a further downfall.

But even where the evil in the previous life is believed to be the cause of a birth in a particularly unfortunate family, it cannot authorise others, individually or collectively, to bar the progress or uplift of such persons, or to insist that they spend their entire life in that same condition. Every one born with a disease is entitled to get rid of it; and every one born in poverty to make honest efforts to rise higher. They also deserve the sympathy of the society in this; though an arrogant attitude on their part will also be out of place, for it is not the society that inflicted on them a birth in such families and circumstances. In particular, no one has an authority under the Law of Karma to inflict such an indignity on any body as to be treated an ‘untouchable’; or to debar him from approaching God in a temple or otherwise. In this connection there is the assurance of the Gītā in verse 9/32 already quoted above and also in the following—

api cet sudurācāro
bhajate māmananyabhāk
sādhureva sa mantavyaḥ
samyagvyavasito hi sah

9/30

“Even the worst of sinners, if devoted to me wholeheartedly, should be deemed a good person; for his reason has attained the right state”. In clear terms the Gita repeatedly says that God resides in and regards all beings equally (5/20; 6/31; 9/4, 6, 7, 29; 10/20, 39; 13/27; 16/3; 18/61) and directs the ideal person to look equally on all men (5/7, 25; 6/29; 12/4, 13; 18/54). In-

deed in a particularly outspoken verse its author declares that to a truly enlightened soul a learned Brahmin is the same as the lowest of the Shudras (5/18). Again, while distinguishing between the *sātvika* or virtuous nature of man and the *tāmasa* or vicious, the Gita makes no distinction between the Brahmin and the Shudra.

Under the present stress of social, political and economic conditions, the old system of *cāturvarṇya* is already on the decline. And in recent times several eminent social reformers in India have raised their powerful voice against its evil aspects. The Mahabharata itself contains a verse saying that all the *varṇas* were originally one (Shanti Parva, 188/10). In fact when one sees the famous ancient hymn of the *puṛuṣasūkta* declaring that the Brahmins represent the mouth, Kshatriyas the hands, Vaishyas the thighs and Shudras the feet of the Cosmic Personality, one wonders how the mouth or hands could ever think of humiliating the feet and even avoid to touch them ! Indeed in India the manner of respectful salutation is to touch the feet themselves. In any case, the above analogy itself shows that all the four classes are integral and equally essential parts of one organic whole.

12

Conclusion

I believe the Law of Karma is one of the very good contributions of India to world culture. While there are no doubt several things that India can usefully learn from the West, the latter too should be immensely benefited by a belief in the Law of Karma. But for this purpose the Law also has to be presented in a proper intelligible garb. This has been my attempt in these pages.

While I have tried to present the Law of Karma in as rational a form as possible, I am at the same time conscious that my argument has to depend on certain metaphysical assumptions. But any other theory which is advanced in this field of human experiences has also to do the same. Even the physical sciences have to rely to some extent on certain basic

postulates. Until man obtains a direct entry into the ultimate secrets of life and reality, his thinking has to be based on assumptions of this sort. All that one can hope is to reduce them to the minimum, and secondly to see that they appear as near to the rational argument as possible.

The Law of Karma has yet to be reconciled with the question of birth control. If each soul is reborn in an environment befitting his Karma, what place is there for limiting the number of human beings as a whole ? What happens to those souls who are refused entry in this manner in the human family ? Again how does the Law function on the international level ? If the citizens of a nation commit atrocities on others on a mass scale, will they be reborn to suffer the consequences in their own country, or as miserable beings anywhere else ?

While these and such other problems call for further consideration, let us not overlook in the meanwhile the positive contribution that the Law of Karma is already able to achieve. The Law reduces the apparent chaos in the moral field to an orderly cosmos. Since long man has been accustomed to witness to his great wonder and sorrow truth often mounted on the cross and untruth crowned on the throne. One also sees two neighbours in diametrically opposite circumstances, and does not know at times whether he should share the joy of one or try to console the other. As the Sanskrit poet aptly says,

kvacit vīṇāvādyam kvacidapi ca hāheti rudanam
kvacit vidvadoṣṭhi kvacidapi surāmatta kalalah
kvacit rāmā ramyā kvacidapi galitukṣṭhavapuṣaḥ
na jāne samsarāḥ kinamṛtamaydh kim viṣamayah

“ When I consider the sweet sound of music coming from one place and at the same time loud weeping and wailing from another, scholarly discourses going on at one place and a drunken brawl at another, a beautiful damsel at one place while the decomposing body of a leper at another, I wonder whether this world is really sweet as nectar or bitter as the poison ”. I feel that the Law of Karma should enable one to maintain his balance of mind in such perplexing situations.

The Law, as may be clear by now, does not mean blind fatalism or helpless determinism. It believes in the freedom of will and so the possibility of self-uplift. Nor does the Law mean extreme optimism—the view that whatever happens is always good. A person can out of his free will perpetrate evil on others; and though it may be duly compensated later on, the fact remains that it was avoidable and should not have been committed. Even if by chance such an evil is at times seen to result in some good, it cannot justify the act. The good, if truly deserved, would have come about even without it.

The Law of Karma teaches us to face congenital misery and other natural accidents with an equanimous attitude of mind. It also enables us to explain rationally the Will of God, operating through the Law of Karma. And finally it should induce one to face the assaults of intentional evil with firmness and yet without needless agitation. Attachment and excitement are two great pitfalls that the Gita wants a man to avoid. While it is true that in the Gita, Krishna definitely asks Arjuna to wage that (righteous) war, one important qualification in that direction usually escapes due attention. Krishna's advice is *yuddhyasva vigatajvarah*, "fight without excitement". Like the true judge one should be prepared to mete out due retribution without any feeling of mean revenge. The latter may set in motion a separate Karma process by itself. After all, the Law of Karma is bound to operate in its own way; but one who co-operates with it by doing his duty with the proper attitude acts as an instrument of it (Gita, 11/32, 33).

All this should lead to an attitude of mental poise and tranquility in the various ups and downs of life, in moments when one's personal sky is bright with clear sunlight or overcast with dark clouds. And even this is surely much that a theory in the field of ethics may hope to achieve. When the mind is stabilised in that state, further enlightenment about the origin and nature of Life and Reality will come in its own course. To know the Good completely one must be good; and to be good one must do the good. But so often a person wants to have the final answers to philosophical problems without waiting to consider whether he is really worthy (*adhikāri*) for it.

This is the appropriate moment for me to conclude. If this essay appears to my readers as but 'one step' in the right direction, if it induces those who already believe in the Law of Karma to consider it critically and justify it rationally, while those who do not yet believe it to give it a serious thought, I shall consider my effort successful.